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# From postnational mobility to posthuman fluidity: Unfixed identities and social responsibilities in *Personal Shopper* (Assayas, 2016) and *Happy End* (Haneke, 2017)

## ABSTRACT

*This article approaches contemporary European cinema as transnational cinema from an angle informed by gender and sexuality studies. It is underpinned by a fluid conception of identity, which it identifies with its objects of study, in terms of production context, market positioning and also form and theme. Specifically, I approach comparatively the embrace of postnational textual identity alongside posthuman – especially post-gender – characterization by two of the most visible recent European auteur films, Olivier Assayas' *Personal Shopper* (2016) and Michael Haneke's *Happy End* (2017). I consider the ideological implications of the narratives' explorations of immorality in a contemporary western context marked in both films by the breakdown of communication and a related failure of ethical responsibility, often constellated in relation to technological advancement. The article draws on the Continental theories of Slavoj Žižek and to a lesser extent Jean Baudrillard and Zygmunt Bauman to illuminate the extent to which these films' subtle and conflicted yet tenaciously enduring nostalgia*

## KEYWORDS

transnational  
posthuman  
gender  
sexuality  
Assayas  
Haneke  
European cinema

1. My thanks to Dorota Ostrowska for this observation.

for earlier ideals of European community is discernible via or inseparable from regret at the loss of an imagined 'natural' mode of embodiment, including more traditional gender roles. It finally reflects briefly on the related question of the attitudes towards European cinema itself, as well as cinemas associated with the past more generally, which these films display and invite the audience to share.

*Personal Shopper* (Assayas, 2016) and *Happy End* (Haneke, 2017) represent films by two of the most major veteran auteurs in European cinema. As such, they can be seen as direct successors to the 1960s and 70s wave of (relatively) mass-exportable European art films – indeed Assayas has often discussed his work explicitly in terms suggestive of an Oedipal relation to the French New Wave. Yet they are explicitly marked by the global, including beyond Europe, in various ways. These include their instantiation of what Mette Hjort (2010: 20–21) calls 'cosmopolitan' transnationalism (a word I use interchangeably with post-nationalism), linked to the directors' global mobility: both have not only been involved in multi-territory (mostly) European co-productions, but Haneke has also worked in the United States and Assayas set and filmed some of his stories in the Far East. Even more striking, though, is the pronounced transnational character of the formal and thematic content of the films under scrutiny. For *Personal Shopper*, the most immediately obvious non-European cultural interlocutor is the United States, through the casting of Kristen Stewart in the eponymous lead role and the related use of English as the film's main language. However, East Asian culture and cinema also inform the narrative, through generic references to horror cinema from the region and especially Japanese classic *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), which like this film uses a technological interface as a portal for threats to the protagonist's life. Not only that, but even *Personal Shopper's* theoretically iconic European city settings of London and Paris undergo the 'abstracting effect' (Jones 2012: 27) of Assayas' storytelling and tend towards generic spaces rather than retaining culturally specific place value. Both comprise many interior shots of boutiques and outdoor Parisian scenes make use of mounted camera mid-traffic shots evocative of many busy first-world metropolises; the view from an apartment there is meanwhile so generically picturesque as to resemble a matte shot (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

*Happy End* is in dialogue with France's former colonies, through the secondary but important presence of a family of North African domestic



Figure 1: Paris is unrecognizable as the artificial-looking, delocalized backdrop to Kyra's apartment in *Personal Shopper* © Metrodome Distribution.

employees in the French household it depicts, a detail that reminds us of Europe's porous borders prior to post-1990 accelerated globalization. It also references Africa more generally, thanks to a final sequence where sub-Saharan migrants invade a bourgeois wedding party. Elsewhere, both narratives unfold extensively in non-places proper (see Augé 1995: 35–40): Eurostar trains and terminals in *Personal Shopper* and the border-zone of Calais in *Happy End*. Consequently, the transport technologies that emblemized technological advancement under modernity, but whose ongoing improvement daily furthers human interconnectedness, provide the initial context for the depictions of globalized postmodernity these films offer up. However, this article will argue that the narratives foreground more insistently what Zygmunt Bauman (2007: 57) has called 'subjectivity fetishism', in connection with transnational capitalism and media culture. This designates a contemporary situation whereby identity is paradoxically asserted through consumption and/or electronic media. As I will show, this is a source of moral panic in both films, in ways intimately connected with constructions of characters' embodiment, notably through gender and sexuality.

Given this engagement with moral questions, it is useful to situate these films specifically within a reappraisal of Enlightenment understandings of human identity couched in an ethical framework. As Temenuga Trifonova notes in the introduction to this volume, the figure of the migrant

challenges us to rethink concepts like 'European identity', citizenship, justice, ethics, liberty, tolerance and hospitality in the post-national context of ephemerality, volatility and contingency that finds people looking for firmer markers of identity.

I understand migration here not only in the sense implied by the aforementioned scene in Haneke's film (and addressed by most other contributions to this special issue), linked to economic or political refugees, but also more literally, with the migrant as a figure for the more broadly defined mobile subject of globalization, as the US ex-patriate protagonist of in *Personal Shopper* represents. To put it another way, Haneke's film centralizes the problem of human mobility across borders as the latest trauma with which Europe in particular, and therefore European cinema as a discursive agent, must grapple. This is apparent if we recall Thomas Elsaesser's (2015: 23–30) arguments about how three major narratives of trauma recurrent in European cinema are emblematically figured in Haneke's 2009 *Das weiße Band*. These are, first, bio and body politics, arising substantially from an ageing population (and, as his chapter elsewhere brings out, having as its flipside a fetishization of youth that we shall see chimes – albeit sometimes dissonantly – with these films' preoccupations); second, the Holocaust; and third, the confrontation with Islam, which is coloured by postcolonial dynamics. A few years later, it is fitting that such narratives are joined and perhaps superseded in memorability by the latest European trauma of the migrant crisis, thanks to the fact that *Happy End* is set in Calais around the unspoken presence of the Jungle, situated as adjacent to the bourgeois household it focalizes, and encroaching into it in the deeply uncomfortable-making final sequence described above. These aspects of the film were moreover emphasized by marketing materials such that the setting itself functioned as a kind of high concept. Thus, the film was widely touted as 'set in the Calais Jungle', while the poster shows

the head table at the closing wedding party looking out towards the camera at a fixed off-screen point that represents the migrants' position hovering at the venue's entrance, evoking the inside-outside dynamics discussed by Elizabeth Ezra in this special issue – with the audience uncomfortably more inside than out. The official trailer mimics the central family's extraordinary wilful blindness about the poverty and oppression on their doorstep by not alluding directly to the Jungle or migrants. Not only is it likely that Haneke's core audience might wish to see his take on this acute and widely discussed social issue, whose cultural purchase has been evidenced by the impact of photographs of migrants (such as the reaction to the press circulation of the child Aylan Kurdi's body washed up on the beach), but the film's 'narrative image' (Ellis 1981: 30) provides something like the saleable narrative hook of the mystery thriller, by pointing towards an unspoken central presence/absence that the 'culturally literate' viewer is invited to enjoy cleverly filling in for themselves.

However, this article takes another leaf out of Elsaesser's (2015) chapter by adopting his proposed methodology of 'enlarging the context' of European cinema studies to think about how a film such as *Personal Shopper*, which deals with the market forces regulating global movement more generally, also speaks to ethical questions running to the heart of European identity and indeed encounters with the other in a philosophical sense. It thus focuses on how social changes under globalized late capitalism and perhaps especially advanced technology change the meaning of subjectivity and therefore notions of ethical subjectivity, with implications for how we conceive self-other dynamics based on social inequity which, not incidentally, the figure of the economic migrant or refugee potently evokes. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the metaphorical shadow cast by the Jungle in *Happy End*, from the boundary limits of the cinematic frame and privileged western subjects' moral conscience, works like the trope of the return of the repressed in tantalizingly enigmatic form in *Caché* (Haneke, 2005) – not least because the comparison with that film's allusion to the barbarities and shame of France's imperial history in Algeria underlines migrants' kinship with former colonial others from a European perspective. In both cases others' low status is figured by their geo-cultural identities, which have arguably come to stand in for traditional class ones under neo-liberalism as an ideology that tends to deny class relations as such. My approach accords, then, with Trifonova's view that 'it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate stories about migration from stories about life under neo-liberalism in general'. It is intended among other things to demonstrate that it is rewarding for analyses concerned with geo-cultural values to look beyond films' overt engagement with political issues to consider how these may – perhaps increasingly – be displaced onto more subtle questions of identity, including revealing how formal elements can be geo-culturally loaded in this domain.

### **CAPITALISM, ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY AND (ETHICAL) VIOLENCE**

Both films under discussion depict blatant ethical failures. *Personal Shopper* focuses on a young American woman, Maureen (Stewart), living in Paris and working as a shopper for a celebrity It-woman figure named Kyra. It soon emerges that she has recently lost her twin brother to a congenital heart condition that she shares. While she professes to hate her job and

have anti-capitalist leanings, her apparent motivation for doing it is to stay in Paris so she can spend time visiting her brother's house outside the city and attempting to connect with him beyond the dead. Notwithstanding her anti-consumerist pose, Maureen has a penchant for trying on the designer clothes lent to Kyra without the latter knowing. More seriously from a viewpoint concerned with moral lapses, she is conned by a boyfriend of her boss' named Ingo (Lars Eidinger) who uses an untraceable number to send her text messages that seem as if they might be from her dead brother, in order to get information that will allow him to murder Kyra and steal some high-ticket Cartier jewellery she has been lent for a social event. During this interaction, Ingo also persuades Maureen to go further than she has previously done in wearing Kyra's clothes, as well as to sleep – and masturbate – at Kyra's apartment on the sly, ethical transgressions that later cause her embarrassment when she is questioned by the police.

*Happy End* offers a satirical portrait of the bourgeois family in the grand tradition of European auteurs from Luis Buñuel to François Ozon via Reiner Werner Fassbinder – and Douglas Sirk, evoked by numerous shots of opulent but enclosed interior spaces and reflecting surfaces, reminding us of the always already global character of film culture. At the start of the film during an intra-credit prologue, we see home video footage of a woman performing her pre-bed washing ritual through a smartphone video interface, accompanied by on-screen textual commentary as coldly and factually dispassionate as hygiene rituals themselves: 'spit ... water ... gargle ... towel ... hair ... put away hairbrush ... night-cream ... check reflection ... piss ... flush ... and out of there ... lights off' (my translation) (Figure 2).

The amateur filmmaker then moves on to discussing and showing the results of poisoning a hamster with antidepressants stolen from their mother, whom we consequently deduce the filmed figure to have been, as well as now making openly critical comments about said mother's self-indulgence and negligent parenting since being left by her husband. In this way, a causal relationship as well as felt equivalency is established between the suffering of the evidently disturbed child and that of the caged hamster. Shortly after this uncontextualized opening, we are given to understand that the camerawoman is 13-year-old Ève (Fantine Harduin), who goes on to (perhaps

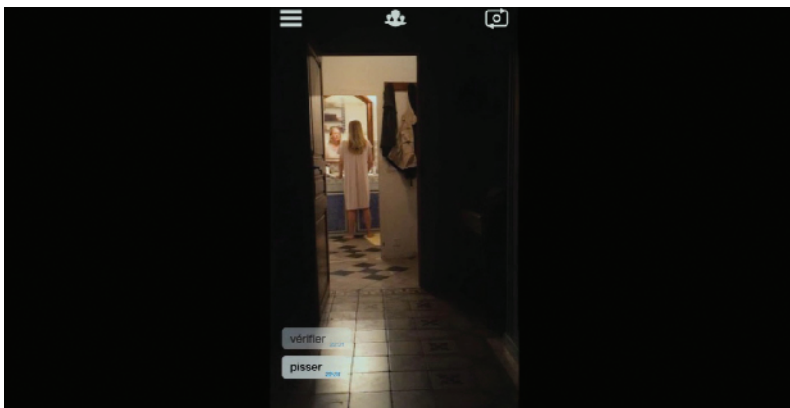


Figure 2: The opening shots of *Happy End* evoke sterility in conjunction with medication © Artificial Eye.

inadvertently) murder her mother by a similar method. She therefore goes to live in a mansion in Calais with her father Thomas (Mathieu Kassovitz), alongside her stepmother and new baby brother – new because she, like Maureen of *Personal Shopper*, has lost a brother previously. Also in situ are her father's extended family, including his elderly father Georges, played by veteran New Wave actor Jean-Louis Trintignant, who spends much of the film trying unsuccessfully to euthanize himself (as he did his wife in *Amour* [Haneke, 2012]), as well his businesswoman sister Anne (Isabelle Huppert) and her troubled son, Pierre (Franz Rogowski). A key subplot concerns an accident that takes place at a building site belonging to Anne's company and for which Pierre is probably responsible. A worker is badly injured and Anne pays him off with no real apology.

It is evident that worldliness, wealth and financial greed are connected to the collapse of ethics in both these films – including in ways imbricated with European values, both traditional and, especially, globalized. The key miscreant in *Happy End* is Huppert's characteristically hard-nosed matriarch Anne, also the bride in the iconic migrant scene where she is marrying a lawyer from *outré-Manche*, who shows no true remorse for the grave injury her construction business has caused. This event is strikingly shown in an (other, typically for Haneke) uncontextualized static long take, and a long shot, on what looks like CCTV footage, accompanied by radio coverage of football results that ironically evokes a space for performing European identity as positively inclusive in both national and class terms. In *Personal Shopper*, it is Ingo, who kills Kyrá in a bloodbath, as well as exploiting his knowledge of Maureen's bereavement trauma to induce her to bring him luxury brand jewellery by convincing her she might be meeting her dead brother. However, they are not the only offenders. Thomas from *Happy End* is also shown to be duplicitous if not amoral, despite (or in the European art-as-critique tradition, appropriately for) his status as a highly respected surgeon, associated with the cornerstone of western society that is the medical institution. Having left Ève and her mother in a clearly suboptimal domestic situation and maintained little relationship with his daughter, he looks set to wreak havoc on his second family, since in the style of the true Gallic romantic he is now having an affair, with a musician named Claire (Hille Perl). Meanwhile in *Personal Shopper*, Kyrá – with a generically western first name and (like Ingo) a nonspecific mittel-European accent – is the personification of globally consumable Eurotrash, exploiting French and British fashion brands to promote her media image. Her character is constructed as a self-serving diva who treats her employees and associates without consideration, referred to by a magazine employee as reputedly 'a monster'.

This is one of the more explicit moments in the film at which a lack of ethics is framed in terms of a disconnect from embodied humanity: as a loss of the 'moral gravity' (Sobchack 2004: 158) provided by the corporeal experience of personhood. Central to this notion is the fear that this foundation is gravely threatened in an era in which immateriality may be increasingly socially determining. It cannot be coincidental that the only scene during which Kyrá is depicted at any length directly has her on a telephone call – apparently to a humanitarian organization with which she is associated as a benefactress but, evidently, for PR purposes – discussing the behaviour of primates: humans' forefathers, also contrasted with futuristic technology from an evolutionary perspective in one of cinema's most iconic scenes in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968). That her conversation here revolves around some

(presumably) endangered gorillas' refusal to be photographed, in one case apparently due to 'depression', and involves her lawyer brandishing contractual obligations for them to be physically present, foregrounds in an absurdist mode the linkage between alienation from authentic experiences and moral bankruptcy.

2. With more obvious relevance to *Personal Shopper*, the figure of the girl has often been theorized as representing neo-liberalism's ideal subject, thanks to what Simone de Beauvoir has famously referred to as the constructed nature of womanhood and to girls' status as in the process of becoming.

## POSTHUMAN GIRLHOOD DEHUMANIZED

If money is the root of several characters' 'evil' behaviour in *Personal Shopper* and *Happy End*, digital media present dangers to young female characters specifically. Further, these 'posthuman' devices are arguably set up as dehumanizing by the films in ways that are intended to heighten the uneasy affects circulating around such technologies when they are used by girls or young women, who are typically associated with embodiment, including physical and metaphorical softness, nurturing qualities and especially sexuality.

Such a use of young women and girls to depict the discomfiting matrix of social changes and cultural emphases associated with advanced capitalism and technology can be usefully situated in several contexts. Female characters have historically been expedient vehicles for negotiating fears about technological change, given women's overidentification with the natural and corporeal (see Huyssen 1982).<sup>2</sup> Children are also obvious figures for pre-lapsarian authenticity at odds with advancements in human technological intervention into the natural world. Indeed, just as Haneke has already debunked the presumed innocence of children in general to shocking effect in *Benny's Video* (Haneke, 1992) and *Funny Games* (Haneke, 1997), where this debunking is linked to entertainment technologies, as well as in *Das weiße Band*, *Happy End* does not limit its potential critique of the latest technological 'threats' to the social order to girlhood. Thus, at one point an unidentified adolescent online video-diarist, presumably a YouTuber and so successor to Kyra as cultural influencer, narrates his life in uncomfortably self-deprecating terms that chime with moral panics over young people's exposure to online self-harm as an extreme example of the self-curation social media encourage. Both *Personal Shopper* and *Happy End* also draw on the tradition of the figure of the uncanny child of either gender in transnational cinema described by Jessica Balanzategui (in which account the Japanese horror movies already cited as an influence on Assayas feature prominently). For Balanzategui, this figure,

untethered from specific national contexts, comes to be a cipher through which ontologies of childhood and progress can be rewritten in the new millennium, heralding a globalized, postmodern era in which linear teleological frameworks and clearly defined national identities fall away.

(2018: 225)

Nonetheless, Maureen and Ève's figuration of fears about technology is lent resonance by their phenomenological embodiment of referential spheres apparently antonymical to the latter's posthumanizing qualities, and gender as well as age contributes to this effect. In the first film, while Maureen is in a long-distance relationship, she spends most of the film avoiding communication with her boyfriend and when they do speak it is via a shaky and delayed Skype interface that dislocates vocality from embodiment. As so often in Haneke, communication is here reduced to empty and often equivocal banalities. Elsewhere, Maureen spends any spare time not dedicated to attempting

to communicate with a ghost on YouTube investigating spiritualism and art. As Nikola Mijovic has observed, not only is the character's evident anomie intimately bound up with her over-investment in gadgets, but indeed – citing Murray Leeder – we can see the trope of the ghost itself in *Personal Shopper* as a further 'figure for the alternating disjuncture between body and spirit wrought by modern communication technologies' (in Mijovic 2017: 21).

Alongside the downplaying of corporeality and sexuality, Maureen's *femininity* is de-emphasized. While Cristina Colet's assertion that she 'swings between male and female gender but is neither one or the other' (2017: 74) is perhaps extreme, Stewart's styling in jeans, sneakers and bomber jackets is markedly androgynous. Androgyny squares, too, with the queer associations of the actress' persona as both prominently bisexual and the star of the *Twilight* series, whose queer fandom has been explored by Bethan Jones (2014) and where, significantly, her character is also linked to non- – perhaps post- – human identity as an immortal vampire. Furthermore, Stewart's César Award-winning role in Assayas' own previous largely English-language feature *The Clouds of Sils Maria* (Haneke, 2014) has been interpreted as centred on the 'the discovery [of] the lesbian as an Other who both is and is not herself' (Bradbury Rance 2019: 45).

If Maureen's associations with the motor-scooter she rides around Paris flirt with a butch identity, her predilections for smoking and wearing stiletto heels, including the first time she illicitly tries on garments of Kyra's, suggest a fascination not only with classic consumer fetish objects (shoes) but also specifically with phallic prostheses. Indeed, Maureen's status as a repository for anxiety makes her a kind of illegitimate descendant of the phallic femme fatale of film noir, with genealogies diverted in the sense that anxiety is now also constructed as *experienced* by the character – so effectively that Graham Fuller (2017: 23) suggests Stewart is peerless in embodying the 'cosmic dread' of our era. The 'restless and mildly awkward' (Mijovic 2017: 20) physicality she lends to a character in constant motion between London, Paris and the French countryside conveys lostness and confusion, while her jittery delivery style, where she falters then words pour out, seems to stand in metonymically for Assayas' very approach to narrative construction, withholding information (as does Haneke) only to deliver key details *en passant* such that 'we seem to happen upon moments within a rush of time' (Jones 2012: 27). Like Steven Shaviro in his analysis of financial flows '[as] the motor of subjectivity' (2010: 8) in several recent western cultural artefacts including Assayas' eponymously postnational *Boarding Gate* (Haneke, 2007), I here emphasize the experiential qualities of Assayas' film as much as any figurative ones, consonant with its identity as part-thriller. The director's well-documented view of actors as embodied individuals, with freedom to improvise, rather than mere role-players, dovetails with my arguments that his films display and can elicit a sense of a yearning for greater corporeal 'authenticity'.

If *Personal Shopper's* very plot draws on a repertoire of generic tropes evoking fear, uneasy affects are perhaps most evident for Haneke's film in sequences where media technology is most dominant and particularly the opening one, whose off-screen voyeur perspective equally directly evokes the horror genre, and which I suggest is at least as important as its titular final one – after all, Haneke likes to misdirect our attention. But while the mystery at the heart of *Personal Shopper* is whether Maureen is in contact with a non-human entity after all, via social media or otherwise – a possibility ultimately left open for the audience as well as her by ongoing apparently 'supernatural'





Figure 3: Pubescent Ève is visually infantilized in *Happy End* © Artificial Eye.

events – in *Happy End* it is almost more difficult to believe that the disturbing material offered up at the start might be more than a hoax, and linked to a major ethical transgression in the shape of matricidal and later also suicidal impulses, let alone authored by an innocent-looking young girl. Moreover, where Maureen’s sexuality was rendered bloodless and perverse, diminutive, small-featured and doll-like, Ève is notably desexualized for a contemporary child of just two months off 13, with typical outfits comprising an androgynous oversize sweatshirt as nightwear or a smocked dress gathered across the chest to fit a flat bust (Figure 3). The combination of elements associated with her character is particularly jarring in a scene in which the young murderer picks up and rocks her crying baby brother in her step-mother’s absence, ostensibly to comfort him, but also picked out as by one reviewer as ‘puls[ing] with anxiety as well as tenderness’ (Nayman 2017: 53). The discomfort elicited by this ‘denaturalization’ of Ève’s identity reinforces the film’s generalized suspicion of alienation from the body.

### SEX AND SPIRITUALITY

The rhyming of anxiety with ‘disturbance’ to (sexualized) gender roles and posthuman technology in *Personal Shopper* parallels certain recent currents in Continental theory. Most strikingly, in his meditation on the posthuman, Slavoj Žižek’s asks the question: ‘What if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact, but the Real of an antagonism that defines humanity, so that once sexual difference is abolished, a human being effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine?’ (n.d.) Žižek bases his discussions on the fact that Alan Turing’s famous imitation game designed to distinguish man from machine was in fact originally intended to differentiate the sexes. This equivalency is echoed in Assayas’ film when Ingo is pursuing Maureen by text message and, trying to decide whether he is Lewis, she asks, ‘R you a man or a woman?’. When Maureen’s only answer is the flippant, ‘[w]hat difference does it make?’, her response is to switch to the question of ‘R u you real?’, then ‘R u alive or dead?’. This contiguity suggests the instinctive interchangeability of these questions, that is, the inherently post-gendered nature of posthuman entities, from ghosts to technological devices. Given the stressful experience of viewing

Maureen's evidently disturbing interaction with her phone in this sequence, which includes her maniacally pacing and fidgeting, even shaking, and at one point turning it off and attempting to block the interlocutor, it is easy to see gender equivalency constructed as an aspect of threatening posthumanism in both Žižek and this film. Posthuman literally designates the technologies here extending and reconstructing the self but overlaps, again, with metaphorical ideas of 'inhuman' behaviour, understood as unethical. Likewise, for Žižek technology compromises spirituality, which in western philosophy connotes moral superiority:

is it not that once the socio-symbolic order is fully established [through the digital realm], the very dimension which introduced the 'transcendent' attitude that defines a human being, the uniquely human sexual passion, appears as its very opposite, as the main OBSTACLE to the elevation of a human being to the pure spirituality, as that which ties him/her down to the inertia of bodily existence?

(Žižek n.d.)

In the work of both Žižek and Jean Baudrillard, writing two years later, the figure of the clone emblemizes the culmination of fears about technological posthumanism, for the former signalling 'the end of what is traditionally designated as the uniquely human spiritual transcendence' (Žižek n.d.) and for the latter representing an 'infinitely more subtle and artificial prosthesis than any mechanical one' (Baudrillard 2002: 20).

Although there are no clones in the films under discussion, in light of the proximity between ghosts and digital technology in the film, the spectre of cross-gender twins in *Personal Shopper* represents a comparable menace to embodied specificity. Moreover, the linkage between technological prosthesis and the compromise of ethics is apparent in this film's most famous scene, where Maureen's ethics fail in the face of the temptation posed by posthuman technology working directly on her body to reconstruct her subjectivity. Thus, when the text messages tell her to put on her boss' clothes, she does so then masturbates in Kyra's bed as if identifying fully with the latter and enjoying it, in a scene in which erotic desire is entirely synonymous with nihilistic self-obliteration (as opposed to 'healthy' heterosexual union). It is worth noting here that this identification is not cross-gender, reminding us that the real transgression as this film sees it is any kind of getting beyond the limits of one's own body, 'personal frontiers [being] shattered' (Mijovic 2017: 20), with gender-shifting merely being one expression of this. The overlap between technological devices and clothing as commodity objects with prosthetic potential for the performance of the self reaches its acme in scenes in which Maureen wears Kyra's clothes. At the apartment she rigs herself up in a bondage harness-like dress with sheer outer-layer, phone in hand (Figure 4). Later, at the hotel, she chooses to slip onto her naked torso and photograph for Ingo a vintage Chanel dress covered in metallic discs described as both 'sensual' and yet 'not easy to wear' by a boutique employee and by Catherine Wheatley (2017) as nostalgic but also futuristic (Figure 5). This sequence is moreover triangulated with allusions to spirituality through cross-cutting with an online dramatization of a séance.

Importantly, the sexual thrill Maureen gets from walking in someone else's metaphorical and literal shoes stems from narrating what she's doing to the



Figures 4 and 5: Like technology, clothes prosthetically reinvent the self in *Personal Shopper* © *Metrodome Distribution*.

unknown messenger (Ingo) on her phone. Such a suggestion bears out claims about the increasing interpenetration of public image curation and subjectivity dating back at least as far as Jürgen Habermas' mid-twentieth-century work in this area and re-emphasized by new media and Internet studies concerned with the rise of self-invention, maintenance and branding in the digital age, especially among young people (e.g., Senft 2012; Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010). As Camilla Sears and Rebecca Godderis (2011: 183) explain in their post-Foucauldian description of the 'electronic panopticon' of reality television, awareness of being constantly watched (here, including in the mind's eye) regulates individuals' behaviour. Conceiving digital culture as promoting self-surveillance underlines its status as the successor to other disciplinary institutions – Big Brother's kinship with the Church. Imagined surveillance, as well as its paradoxical connection to lived experience, is perfectly evoked by Stewart's performance, at times combining an aforementioned naturalness with its very opposite, 'self-consciousness with just "being" in front of the camera'. For Mijovic, this 'could even mark a new stage in the craft of acting, which may not have been possible before the emergence of the generation that she belongs to – those who have grown up in front of digital cameras' (Mijovic 2017: 20).

An attitude of disturbance at perceived human disconnection from the body through technological self-narration specifically is equally in evidence

in the plotline in *Happy End* concerned with Thomas' affair with Claire. Like Maureen's relationship, this liaison is, as far as we see, conducted exclusively via intensely personal online messages, such as:

Claire:  
life at last  
no  
beyond life  
whatever happens  
even if you forget me one day  
I'm YOURS forever.  
everything's blurry  
my eyes are swimming with tears, my darling.

Thomas:  
i'm thirsty for your tears and I don't want you to cry.  
but I'd like to see you pissing with pain so I can comfort you.  
i'd like to hurt you because I can't be inside you  
entirely inside you.

Claire:  
don't hide even your most outrageous desires from me  
use me  
a gift...

(my translation)

This dialogue's blend of visceral, sado-masochistic pornography ('see you pissing with pain', 'I'd like to hurt you because I can't be [...] entirely inside you') with clichéd romance ('YOURS forever') and pseudo-spirituality ('beyond life') echoes Žižek's description of the role of sex in defining the self precisely through the negation or absence of self that is implied by the erotic (especially 'use me'). Here, however, the intensity of the sentiments is undercut by the bare functionality of their mode of communication, filmed such that the screen is again entirely populated by the device interface, in a dull, static long-shot. These aesthetics and a context of serial uxorial neglect, not to mention the fact that at one point Ève reads the age-inappropriate messages (and, worse, is unfazed, thinking only about the affair's potential practical implications for her), frames giving in to such drives is as a hollow and ersatz form of potentially socially destructive self-gratification: precisely as described by Žižek, in *Happy End* sexuality, when mediated by technology, paradoxically loses its transcendent power and instead merely 'ties him/her down to the inertia of bodily existence'. The film offers no positive model of embodied humanness between the self-conscious denial of sexuality by the girl figure unwilling to join the desultory adult world presented to her (cf. Nayman 2017: 53) and the perversion of the transcendent possibilities of erotics into a base and tawdry compulsion.

In both these films, then, there is a sense that true ethics relies on a reified notion of the body inimical to contemporary scientific and technological advancement. This may not be surprising, given the suspicion of bio-medical scientific institutions already touched on in Haneke and co-implicated with the well-known pro-euthenasia stance also conveyed in *Happy End*, alongside Assayas' long-standing association with Situationist thought. Nonetheless,

criticisms can be made of such an attitude. Queer theorists such as Jackie Stacey and Lee Edelman have seen more positive aspects to the possibility of a world unfettered by so-called reproductive futurism than have Žižek and Baudrillard. From a gender studies perspective, these narratives are situated at an equally distanced remove from the feminist utopia described by Donna Haraway in 'A manifesto for cyborgs' (1985), where the posthuman was seen to offer a potential way out of the impasse of gender differentiation. Maureen's proto-post-gender identity or Ève's status as simultaneously pre-adolescent and world-wearily beyond such considerations might have been imagined differently as a source of liberating potential. Although the latter character's name – departing from the selection of Haneke regulars (especially Anne and Georges, in multiple films) – is no doubt intended ironically, from this perspective it is highly appropriate. The Cyborg may not 'recognize the Garden of Eden', symbolizing gender oppositionality and a non-estranged relationship to the body, or 'dream of community on the model of the organic family' (Haraway 2004: 9); however, these films at times seem to invite us to do just that.

### EUROPEAN VALUES, EUROPEAN CINEMA

These analyses bear out Elsaesser's (2015: 23) identification of a key strand of contemporary European cinema that lends itself to film studies' contemporary fascination with 'skins and screens'. At the same time, the centrality of themes of masochistic self-negation to both *Personal Shopper* and *Happy End* resonates with a defining trait of the continent's cinema as a whole also picked out by Elsaesser and others (Harrod et al. 2015: 2, 11): a tendency for self-deprecation – but one couched in a kind of self-knowing superiority inseparable from privileged entitlement and by extension an investment in maintaining the status quo, which, in her forthcoming book *The Figure of the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema*, Trifonova cogently dates back at least as far as Pascal Bruckner's scathing commentary on the disingenuous 'tears of the white man' in the colonial era. It is not difficult to accuse *Personal Shopper* of hypocrisy, trading as it does on the visual allure of the fashion labels whose industry's effects it invites its viewer to scorn. As for *Happy End*, *Sight and Sound*'s review echoes my sense of implied authorial self-critique in suggestive terms, claiming that the film marks a new approach for Haneke in adopting a stance towards its audience that is in fact 'less imperious' as more generous – perhaps empathetic – than in previous works (Nayman 2017: 53). It is true that potential authorial co-implication with *Happy End*'s viewer contrasts, for example, with the 'fascist' stance of *Caché*, which made similar use of embedded media of enigmatic origin to condemn Europe's actions on the global stage historically, but where only Haneke himself escaped censure (Wheatley 2006: 36). Nonetheless, somewhat paradoxically, constructing its implied perspective in alignment with its audience's could be seen precisely to address a spectatorial position of self-congratulatory knowledge (even if based on awareness of chagrin through enmeshment in circuits of inequality that naturalize human callousness), rather than circumvent the existence of such a position.

Just as colonial imperialism and fascism are underpinned by paternalistic rhetoric, if I have connected themes in the films under scrutiny to nostalgia for a time of greater gender differentiation, among other embodied values, an inevitable implication of this is nostalgia for a more adequately authoritarian patriarch, whether this be for real 'pillars of the community' who have not

3. This paragraph has been updated since the original publication of this article. The following text has been omitted due to a factual error: '[...] and it appears no accident that at one point the television in *Happy End* shows news coverage of a pre-cursor to the far-right separatist movements sweeping across Europe and the Western World today, in the shape of the UK's Scottish Referendum. If *Happy End* betrays such sentiment, it here also imputes this very clearly to its viewers by placing the camera in the position of the television set.'

4. See, for instance, Christopher Sharrett's (2006: 15) analysis of this question in reference to European culture in Haneke.

failed in their ethical duties in *Happy End* or for Ève and Maureen's mourned proto-patriarchal male siblings – 'future boss[es]' (author's own translation), as Anne describes Ève's risibly inadequate-to-the-role drunkard cousin Pierre – without whom these characters are shown to be vulnerable and adrift. These absences can be read as evoking Christian belief – faith in a listening God rather than Lewis' recalcitrant if not illusory ghost – but also, perhaps, the loss of stronger identity and leadership, for which the films consequently betray intermittent regret. This is timely given the rise to western political dominance of autocrats in very recent years.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the nostalgia on display reproduces the mode's original structural profile, as a longing for something never experienced – an ill-defined pre-lapsarian fantasy, rather than any former era. These films offer condemnations rather than alternatives. Indeed, much scholarship on Haneke has centred on the totalizing nature of his social critique, encompassing high and low culture, tradition and modernity.<sup>4</sup> Assayas' film could be seen to bring together his two key modes of film narration, 'people chasing each other across the globe with guns and expense accounts', generally in peril, and the much more appealingly presented old European world of 'people talking in cafes' (Jones 2012: 34) – or in this case, a country manor and later a ramshackle house in the Parisian suburbs, where Maureen interacts with Lewis' girlfriend. However, that these locations involve the film's clearest suggestions of ghostly activity signals this world's self-consciously, irretrievably past status – like maternal heritage in *L'Heure d'été* (Assayas, 2008) or the cinematic past of silent filmmaking in France, overwritten by postmodernity, in *Irma Vep* (Assayas, 1996).

The latter film is a good example of the recently accelerated intersectionality of transnational and cinematic cultures, when *Les Vampires* (Feuillade, 1915) is reimagined drawing elements from Hong King action cinema through the casting of Maggie Cheung as the star in its imagined remake. This overlap occurs because the same technologies that have created the global village have re-shaped the content and relativized the status of cinema as an image-based medium, as Haneke and Assayas are acutely aware. Thus, *Personal Shopper* includes both long periods of an almost black screen during some haunted house sequences and famously a sequence of text messaging (incidentally, a communication mode already in obsolescence) lasting more than 20 minutes, while as indicated Haneke outdoes even himself with embedded screens in *Happy End*. The result for two filmmakers highly invested in visual images once again leaves open a space for nostalgia, explored in microcosm by one scene from the later film. During the (presumed) YouTube clip described earlier, nostalgia for a better time of early childhood is implicitly paired with cinematic nostalgia. This is because the boy's self-critical monologue, whose emblematic status for fears about the socially destructive character of social media I have outlined, involves looking back over photos of his younger self and mocking his hairstyle, to strains of Richard Sanderson's 'Reality'. Not only does this evoke an illusory and romanticized past in which, 'there was something special in the air' and '[d]reams are my reality//the only kind of real fantasy', but the dreamworld described by the song is synonymous with a specifically cinematic imaginary of youth, through its status as the theme tune to classic early French teenpic *La Boum* (Pinoteau, 1980). The fact that this reference would be very familiar to French viewers but almost nobody else suggests the imbrication of temporal nostalgia with geo-cultural longing for an era of national cinema paradigms. In a similar fashion, *Personal Shopper*

does not shy away from leaving commentary over a YouTube video describing the artist Hilma Aft Klimt in Swedish, just as the film's German-speaking audience would be positioned to glean significant extra resonance from the use of Marlene Dietrich's rendition of 'Das Hobeloid', concerned with the levelling of different identities as well as with the death drive, during the pivotal scene where Maureen wears Kyra's dress.

Yet just as the YouTuber's 'nostalgia' is offered highly ironically through his scathing commentary, such a deliberate deployment of elements drawn from many cultures underlines the fact that in the end it is in its post-national, indeed post-European, reach that contemporary genre-inflected (relatively), accessible art cinema's potential lies for these filmmakers. Kent Jones (2012: 22) has discussed Assayas' cinema in terms of an investment in 'the sense of personal agency shared between characters, the phantom awareness of how one measures up against other people, within society, as a citizen of the world'. World citizenship is the literal meaning of cosmopolitan identity and I would suggest that, for all their critiques of bourgeois global elites, both Assayas and Haneke use transnationally positioned cinema as a way to address the experience of living under globalized postmodernity – as Shaviro also argues for Assayas – along with the dizzying multiplicity of ethical problems which today's alienating multinational, multicorporate, multilingual and multimedia world implies. They are also quicker to embrace the productive possibilities of the evolution of cinema – what haptic theory dubs 'the body of the film' – than that of the human bodies on-screen, whether by converting the signature stately establishing long take, with its connotations of mastery, into a live digital interface (Haneke), or having the plot hinge on a moment where there is literally 'nothing to see' (Assayas) (Wheatley 2017, describing a track from the lift of the hotel where Maureen awaits her interlocutor to the building's automatically opening and closing doors, again eliding ghostly presence with technology gone awry). Taking seriously Marshall McLuhan's (1967) dictum that 'the medium is the message', then, at a formal level, including as linked to postnational address, Haneke and Assayas attempt to tackle the chaos of hypermobile postmodernity on its own terms for better as well as worse. It only remains for them to extend a comparably open-minded and playful attitude to its mobile subjects.

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